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Rocket fuel found in 1985

EPA wrong to reject water study results, lawyer says

By Laurence Darmiento
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Water regulators believed they had found rocket-fuel contamination in underground water south of Azusa 12 years ago, but rejected those findings concluding the testing method was flawed, according to documents released Monday.

The contaminant perchlorate — which has since shut down four Valley wells when discovered in a new round of refined testing this year — was detected in 1985 in tests ordered by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, according to test results obtained by an attorney handling a water pollution lawsuit.

However, a year later the EPA discounted the tests, performed by an independent lab, after finding supposedly pure control samples also were testing positive for perchlorate. It found that nitrate pollution, common in the area, could

cause false positive results for the rocket-fuel additive.

"Admittedly the test was crude, but they had reason to further investigate. The issue was that there was a notice of a potential problem," said Pasadena attorney Mark Algorri, who represents the Committee Against Toxic Water Exposure in the San Gabriel Valley and is preparing a lawsuit.

"Somebody woke up out of their sleep, and all of a sudden we have something in 1997 that says there was perchlorate. The ball was dropped. There was no doubt about it," he said.

Perchlorate, which has been linked to thyroid disorders, is used as an accelerant in solid rocket fuel. It inhibits the absorption of iodine by the thyroid gland, which regulates growth and metabolism.

The EPA ordered the 1985 tests noting Aerojet had developed and tested rocket engines at its Azusa plant. The company has since been named

among 19 companies potentially responsible for a 26-square-mile plume of water south of its plant polluted with industrial solvents and perchlorate.

EPA officials said Monday they were at a loss to comment on the documents since they were unable to immediately locate them. However, Keith Takata, chief of the EPA's Superfund program in California, said it has taken years to develop reliable methods of detecting perchlorate.

The 1985 results showed that wells operated by eight water purveyors, including the Covina Irrigating Co., the cities of Azusa and Glendora and Miller Brewing Co. were contaminated by perchlorate at levels ranging from 110 parts per billion to 2,600 parts per billion.

In comparison, the four wells shut down this year had levels no higher than 159 parts per billion. Early this year the state set a provisional health standard of 18 parts per billion.